Germany's Drive to the West (Drang Nach Westen)

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CONCLUSION

WE HAVE come to the end of the Great War and Germany's attempts to extend her political and economic influence over much of the European continent and overseas. The anti-climax to more than four years of great expectations did not come until several months later, when the war aims of the Allies won their triumphal victory at the Peace Conference of Paris. Instead of acquiring the ore basin of Briey and Longwy, Germany had to cede Alsace and Lorraine to France. Instead of gaining all or part of Belgium, she was forced to give up the districts of Eupen and Malmédy. The dream of a large Mittelafrica not only failed to materialize, but Germany lost even the colonies she held before 1914. And finally, far from being able to regain the expenses of the war from their enemies, the Germans had to shoulder the whole burden of misery and destruction which the war had caused to all the world. Annexationism, as the final outcome of the war showed, was a universal problem, not confined to one particular nation. What differences existed between the two groups of powers were of objective rather than of principle. Viewed in the light of four years of annexationist propaganda and the treaties of Brest-Litovsk and Bucharest, the kind of peace settlement which a victorious Germany would have imposed upon her western opponents would most likely have equalled, if not surpassed, the one she was forced to sign at Versailles. Nevertheless, the German people have been almost unanimous in their condemnation of the Versailles Treaty; and ironically enough, the most vociferous denunciations of its terms have come from the very circles that were most outspoken in favor of annexations during the First World War.

It is difficult to sum up a topic as complex as the present one, not the least because it is a study of unfulfilled ambitions. As with any development which fails to reach its logical conclusion, a discussion of the effects of German expansionist plans on the history of the Empire will move as much in the realm of speculation as in the realm of fact. Still, there are two final questions that should be answered on the basis of the material presented in this study. One
concerns the general influence of the problem of war aims on German affairs during the war; the second the role which various factors and factions within Germany played in the propagation of war aims—in other words: who was responsible for the Drang nach Westen?

In the field of foreign affairs, the question uppermost in the minds of historians has been whether the continued declaration of German war aims was responsible for the failure to reach a peace of understanding during the course of the war. To answer this question one has to consider not merely Germany's war aims, but those of her opponents as well. To use a concrete example: while the problem of Belgium, because of Great Britain's insistence on Belgian independence, developed into one of the crucial obstacles to a negotiated peace, the problem of Alsace-Lorraine was just as important to Germany as Belgium was to Great Britain. If Germany failed to renounce Belgium, France made it perfectly clear that she never intended to give up her demand for the return of Alsace-Lorraine. Nevertheless, there were several situations—and here we enter the realm of speculation—in which a clear statement on Belgium might have resulted in peace negotiations. England might have been willing to break her commitments under the secret treaties of London and make a separate peace with Germany; or else she could bring sufficient pressure to bear on France, so that the latter would give up her aims in Alsace-Lorraine; or maybe a clear German statement would have strengthened the peace-loving groups within the Allied nations, who in turn might have forced their governments to negotiate peace with Germany. Considering these various possibilities, a clear German statement on Belgium would have been decidedly worth trying. Not to have made it remains a grave blunder of German foreign policy during the World War.

In trying to evaluate the influence of war aims upon domestic affairs in Germany, we are on somewhat safer ground. Entering the war with a number of internal problems, the solution of which had long been overdue, the German people soon found this solution postponed not only for the duration of the war, but most likely for an indefinite period. Annexationism in its most outspoken form became the main province of the upper classes, in their vain hope of maintaining their own political and social supremacy. To the lower classes it appeared, with much justification, that the war
was being carried on for the sake of foreign gains, which in turn would only serve to perpetuate domestic injustices. To have thus maintained and intensified the political, social, and economic cleavages among the German people at one of the most critical periods of its existence is one of the serious responsibilities of annexationism.

How large a part these foreign and domestic influences of annexationism played in shaping the history of the German Empire during the World War is difficult to say. To realize their magnitude, we do well to remember the effect of war aims on the dismissal of such important political figures as Bethmann Hollweg and Kuhlmann, both of them victims of the annexationists. We should also remember the many attempts to arrive at a negotiated peace settlement, all of them condemned to failure because of the war aims, declared or implied, of the two groups of belligerents. And finally, we should bear in mind the internal strife and disunity created by four years of wrangling over war aims which contributed decisively to the weakening and final collapse of Imperial Germany.

As to the problem of responsibility, it is a more difficult and controversial one. The great number of factors involved in the propagation of German war aims makes it difficult to assign to each a due share of liability for the blunders committed in the handling of the war aims problem. Although the German government entered the war without specific aims, it would have been unrealistic, after the successes of Germany’s armed forces, to expect this state of affairs to last. Germany in 1914 was no longer the saturated power she had been under Bismarck. An extension of territory, the gain of new fields of commercial activity, and the acquisition of additional sources of raw material were looked upon as absolute necessities to a growing and highly industrialized country. The German government, therefore, should have drawn up a realistic program of war aims, moderate in scope but specific in character. This program should have been so designed as to concentrate on one of the major fields of possible expansion—east, west, or overseas—and thus, by driving a wedge between the Allied Powers, make possible the kind of negotiated peace which had become an unavoidable necessity since the failure of the Schlieffen plan in 1914. In addition to such specific aims, a series of general principles might have completed a program which, much in the way of President Wilson’s Fourteen Points, would have won the support of the majority of Germans, thus making possible a more effective conduct of the war.
Instead, the Imperial government preferred to leave the question of war aims vague and undecided, clinging to the concept of a war of defense, which few people in Germany and still fewer outside really believed. Left without direction from above but encouraged by the ambiguity of official pronouncements, the German people embarked upon a heated controversy over war aims, which destroyed the last vestige of internal unity created by the outbreak of war. Instead of counteracting this confusion of minds by publishing a definite set of aims, the government preferred to suppress this public discussion, thus only increasing its intensity. Abroad, the failure to come out clearly for or against annexations, viewed in connection with these unofficial utterances in favor of far-reaching war aims, created an atmosphere of suspicion, which made any peace short of complete German or Allied victory impossible.

The responsibility for initiating this policy of vagueness and confusion belongs to Bethmann Hollweg. It was he who set the style for the kind of war aims statement open to almost any interpretation which was then followed by his two successors. While moderate in his aims the uncertainty of Bethmann's statements was a direct boon to his annexationist opponents, to whose attacks he finally succumbed. Bethmann's chief motive was a sincere desire to maintain Germany's internal unity by avoiding the disagreement inherent in the vital question of war aims. But even though his own aims were moderate it would be incorrect to consider the Chancellor averse to any expansion whatsoever. Like most of his countrymen, Bethmann was willing to await the outcome of war before deciding on a definite set of aims. Any premature declaration, he felt, would only limit this German choice. Where Bethmann differed from his successors was in his willingness to give up whatever hopes of gain he had, if in return a negotiated peace could be won. The question what might have happened if his dismissal had not come in the midst of the Papal peace move, is one of the most interesting points of speculation of the whole World War.

After the middle of 1917, the direction of affairs shifted from the hands of the political to those of Germany's military authorities. While outwardly the ambiguous policy on war aims continued, there was no longer much doubt as to the annexationist ambitions of those in command. The fact that this change occurred when popular sentiment in Germany and elsewhere grew increas-
ingly desirous of peace, was most deplorable. The primary motive behind the war aims of the Supreme Command was the attempt to secure, once and for all, Germany's position in Western Europe. Ludendorff's views on the fundamental strategic significance of Belgium should have made him realize, however, that Germany's desire of keeping Belgium was matched by an equally strong Allied determination to prevent Germany from gaining too powerful a position there. As the war progressed, it became increasingly clear that there were only two possible alternatives: a German victory, enabling her to do with Belgium as she pleased, or a negotiated peace, requiring first and foremost that Germany give up Belgium. There appear to have been a few brief instances during the spring of 1918, especially in his conversations with von Haeften, when Ludendorff was more moderate on the subject of Belgium; though to declare this moderation openly, he felt, might seriously affect the morale of the German army. The view held by Bethmann Hollweg, that it was a sufficiently great achievement for Germany to have withstood successfully the large coalition of her enemies, was foreign to the military mind. Both Hindenburg and Ludendorff shared the mistaken belief that the average soldier would only continue fighting if he was shown sufficiently large war aims. If anything, the opposite was true. As the hardships of war increased most soldiers were indignant at the suggestion of continuously risking their lives for the sake of ultimate material gains.

Although politically unsound, the strategic motives behind the army's stubborn annexationism are understandable from the point of view of its own limited, military sphere. The unfortunate part was that the Supreme Command gained such a predominating influence over the direction of German affairs. The absence of any suitable counterweight in the political field tended to centralize complete political as well as military responsibility in the hands of General Ludendorff. His strong and domineering personality played a not insignificant part in this process. As a result the necessary and mutually corrective division of control between military and political authorities disappeared. In addition we must remember the close relationship between Ludendorff and the small but powerful annexationist minority, based on a community of war aims and a deep affinity of social background and political belief. The constant contact between the Supreme Command and Germany's barons of industry suggests that the motives which
prompted the annexationism of the German army were not always and exclusively military. Ludendorff's uncompromising adherence to strong war aims was the most important single influence in Germany's misguided efforts to extend her sphere of influence to the west. Although his attitude was determined by the needs of his country, these needs were seen entirely through the eyes of his profession and class. On the one hand they included the necessary strategic improvements enabling the General Staff to be prepared for the next war; and on the other such material and territorial gains as would ensure the maintenance of the existing political and social order. There was really little difference between Ludendorff and most of the radical annexationists, except that the General was in a position where he could enforce his annexationist views.

In discussing the attitude of the German people towards war aims, we have distinguished between the large and inarticulate masses and their parliamentary representatives. The views of the first group are difficult to ascertain. It seems fairly certain, however, that the majority of Germans, under the influence of early military successes, were in favor of more or less strong aims. As the war progressed, this stand became more moderate. The change, which became pronounced some time in 1916, ended in a widespread longing for peace among the lower classes. This fact was not due to any greater degree of political insight on the part of this group over its social and economic betters, but rather to the fact that the common people in Germany suffered more deeply from the hardships of war. It was partly for that reason that the change of attitude from annexationism to moderation was not reflected in the German Reichstag until the middle of 1917. Despite the absence of constitutional provisions to that effect, the influence of the Reichstag became ever greater as the war continued. Its role in the dismissal of both Bethmann Hollweg and Michaelis signified the change from bureaucratic to parliamentary regime. But unfortunately little use was made of this newly-won power to demand a voice in the government's foreign policy. The 1917 Peace Resolution was as far as the majority of the Reichstag was willing to go. As soon as the military situation improved, it reverted to its earlier acquiescence in the decisions of Germany's political and military leaders, as shown in the stand taken on the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. In the majority of its middle class, the
German people resembled those "tree-frog annexationists" whose war aims changed with the news from the front. Only the Socialists, with some exceptions, maintained a consistently and courageously anti-annexationist platform from the first day of the war to the last.

There remains the small group of annexationists to which we have devoted so much of our discussion. Granted the German civil government was too vague and not always moderate in its aims, granted many Germans changed their views according to the success or failure of the armed forces, still there were several critical situations in which the feeling of moderation might have gained the upper hand had it not been for the vigilance of the annexationist groups and individuals organized behind the Kriegszielbewegung. It was this numerically unimportant but politically, financially, and intellectually powerful minority which took the lead in the evolution of a German program of war aims. Among these radical annexationists, the great industrialists played a particularly important role. There may be some doubt as to the motives of some of the members of the Kriegszielbewegung whose patriotism was more important than their greed; there is no doubt as we deal with men like Thyssen, Stinnes, Kirdorf, Hugenberg, Kloeckner, Beukenberg, and their lesser known associates. To these men Germany's westward expansion meant specific material gains, and Germany's failure to expand meant specific material losses.

It was a combination of elements, then, industrialists, Pan-Germans, the parties of the Right, and the Supreme Command, that was responsible for the stubborn propagation of large war aims, which condemned the German people to remain at war until the bitter end. Each of these forces had its own particular reasons for wanting to hold out for far-reaching territorial gains; yet one aim most of them had in common—to ensure through a successful peace settlement the continuation of the existing order, to their own advantage, and to the political and economic detriment of the majority of the German people.